Skype:

A Technology Product Assessment

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The use of Skype can be a wonderful addition to any classroom or computer lab in schools of every level. Skype is a software application that allows users to make voice calls and to video conference over the Internet. It also includes features such as instant messaging and file transfer, as well. The newest version of Skype (5.0 released on October 14, 2010) includes a beta version that allows group video conferencing for up to 5 people at a time. Because Skype communications are over the Internet, they can be used between persons all over the globe. And the price is right: FREE!

Created in 2003, Skype, the company, is partially owned by eBay and by various investor groups. It is one of the most popular Internet applications boasting more than 443 million user accounts. At peak times, there can be upwards of 23 million people online at a time. Users include individuals, businesses, schools and government.

Hardware requirements for Skype are basic. Skype works with both Windows (2000/XP/Vista/7) and Mac operating systems. Users need an internet connection, speakers and a microphone, with a Webcam for video conferencing.

To set up an account, users need to download the Skype software from the website, [www.Skype.com](http://www.Skype.com). It is an easy process that requires the user to follow a few screen prompts which will walk the newbie through getting a Skype ID, as well as testing their system’s microphone, speakers and webcam. To find others to communicate with on Skype, under the New Contact tab you can search for people using Skype names, email addresses or full names. After people are added to your Contact list, whenever you are signed in, it is easy to see who else is online and ready to chat by the icons listed on the Contacts list.

Skype can be a very valuable tool to educators and students. Skype allows for face-to-face contact between individuals and groups from any location in the world. This contact is in real time. Suddenly students have access to a whole multitude of people and resources from one end of the world to the other. It can be used to bring experts into the classrooms, to open communication with other students in classrooms from a different continent, to discuss books directly with their authors, or to follow friends and relatives on journeys to foreign places. For a minimal investment ($29.95) users can download Replay Telecorder (<http://www.applian.com/replay-telecorder/>), an application which allows you to record and save Skype video conferences, in case the time zone differences are not conducive to students’ schedules.

We have been using Skype this year to communicate with a student whose family is living in China for 6 months. Because of the 12-hour time difference, we sign on at 8:15 a.m., which is 8:15 p.m. for Sam and his family. The students are able to keep Sam up to date on everything happening at school, including football game scores, school projects, and field trips. In return, Sam is telling his classmates about life in China, from a first person perspective. He tells them about what they are studying in the school there, and how different the food is. He has been able to hold his computer/webcam by the window and show us the lights from the Festival of the Moon celebration. China doesn’t seem like such a faraway place to our students now, but as an interesting and exciting destination. We used Skype for this same purpose last year with another student whose family was in Denmark and Spain for a year.

Another excellent use of Skype is for students to practice their language skills with native speakers of other languages. Through programs like ePals, students can establish relationships with kids in classrooms from other countries. Then contact can be made in Skype, and students can converse practicing new language skills. If there is a problem understanding someone, students can communicate by typing messages in the program, and get instant clarification from their partners.

Students can learn many valuable concepts through the use of Skype. They have to figure out changes in time zones in order to speak to someone in a distant location. They will develop a greater understanding of world geography while identifying exactly where their contact is. They will learn appropriate etiquette in online communications while talking with an author or scientist or professor at a university who is sharing some of their expertise with the students. They will learn to be better listeners and speakers as they communicate directly with persons of different backgrounds, cultures, races, and languages. They will see first-hand that these “foreigners” are people, just like them. That they laugh and get nervous and can be intelligent and funny just like the kids sitting around us in the room! Using Skype can help students become more comfortable in expressing themselves and helping them to be more globally aware.

Skype does a great job of making the world feel a little bit smaller and a lot more accessible. Students learn that they don’t have to fear the unknown of the faraway, but rather can embrace it.

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